

## Book Review: Alex de Waal, ed., War in Darfur and the Search for Peace

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### Abstract.

War in Darfur and the Search for Peace, edited by Alex de Waal, offers an enlightening tour of the contested intellectual terrain encountered by those who have concerned themselves with the fate of Sudan's westernmost region since the escalation of the conflict there at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The fact that one is contributing to a journal dedicated to preventing the radical diminishing of peoples and cultures, aka genocide, guides the selection of parts of the volume under review that will receive special attention here. That it is an attempt to understand the failure of negotiations between the Sudanese government and the opposing "movements" rather than the entire course of the genocidal conflict makes this work command attention. When a general history of Sudan is written in years to come, this failure may come to be viewed as an especially tragic defining episode in a period of time when the destruction of the Darfuri people and their culture might have been stopped.

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## Book Review

Alex de Waal, ed., *War in Darfur and the Search for Peace*.  
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*War in Darfur and the Search for Peace*, edited by Alex de Waal, offers an enlightening tour of the contested intellectual terrain encountered by those who have concerned themselves with the fate of Sudan's westernmost region since the escalation of the conflict there at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The fact that one is contributing to a journal dedicated to preventing the radical diminishing of peoples and cultures, aka genocide, guides the selection of parts of the volume under review that will receive special attention here. That it is an attempt to understand the failure of negotiations between the Sudanese government and the opposing "movements" rather than the entire course of the genocidal conflict makes this work command attention. When a general history of Sudan is written in years to come, this failure may come to be viewed as an especially tragic defining episode in a period of time when the destruction of the Darfuri people and their culture might have been stopped.

The first item presented in the attempt to explain the failure of peace is de Waal's analysis of the nature of the Sudanese regime in Khartoum. In an essay introducing the volume, "Sudan: The Turbulent State," he describes a crucially important technique whereby the current National Congress Party regime headed by General Omar al-Bashir maintains its power. Although many other empires have used the principle of "divide and rule" to maintain the dominance of the central authority, few have ever come close to the skill with which the regime that came to power in 1989 has combined the use of land and air units against armed opponents, land and air units against civilians, and the enlistment of tribally based militias (the core of the Janjaweed formations) to create a state of continuing chaos and uncertainty on its periphery in Darfur, just as it did in the southern provinces and the Nuba Mountains in its first decade in power.

It is this set of armed actions that de Waal offers as the principal element of the turbulence-creation that serves to perpetuate the power of what he labels the "hyper-dominant," predatory regime in Khartoum. Such is the nature of the government in the Sudanese capital, with its offices and the subordinate institutions and ideologically and organizationally connected individuals occupying them. This set of offices was also the structure that John Garang wished to use as the base for a unified, secular, democratic, and decentralized country. As the al-Bashir regime's triumph over Garang's vision of a new Sudan suggests, Sudan is probably best characterized not as a nation-state in the manner of Italy, Argentina, or Malawi, but as an empire-state, ruling over its internal colonies (in the south, the east, the Nuba Mountains, and Darfur), with an especially effective combination of violence, manipulation, and the cooptation of possible opponents.

As presented in the volume's opening essay, de Waal's list of devices used to stir the periphery's political brew into a chaotic, deadly pottage appears incomplete. Else-

where in the work, however, and in other writings about Sudan, one may find ample additional evidence revealing the government of Sudan's (GoS) catalogue of the weapons of disorder: selective neglect in delivering to the region vital services and equipment; comprehensive administrative warfare entailing such techniques as limitation of access to the region by journalists and officials, permit proliferation, and the routine imposition of deliberately extended delay; use of terror and torture in the "ghost houses" of the Khartoum area; manipulation of aid organizations into near-total dependence on Khartoum's transportation facilities as well as collusion in the limitation of investigators' access to camp residents; encapsulation and cat-and-mouse censorship of the opposition press; energetic, opportunity-sensitive international media and diplomatic operations; and superbly calibrated, scruple-free, and impressively deceptive international and intranational negotiations.

Rather than cataloguing such tactics, however, de Waal's opening essay continues with a description of what he calls "the second most persistent fact in Sudanese political history . . . the inability of any one elite faction to establish unchallenged political dominance over the state" (4). In his view, the special resources of Khartoum enable it, alone of all Sudan's cities, to support multiple elite groups. None has established "unchallenged political dominance" over the other, producing a situation of chronic instability. The 1989 military coup that brought al-Bashir and his fellow Islamist revolutionaries to power merely masked the "multiple competing power centers in Khartoum and the frequent reconfigurations within the ruling group" (5). This fragmentation, de Waal argues, prevents the pursuit of any long-term political strategy, forcing the regime to resort to an ad hoc style, with short-term crisis management in all areas of operation, including both counterinsurgency, administrative reform, and foreign relations. The resulting instability has been "projected into the provinces," making it impossible to govern them. Thus the chaos that prevents opponents of the regime from organizing themselves either to defeat the regime or to make a successful common plan for a negotiated settlement results both from the conscious creation of disorder the GoS has enlisted in the cause of rule and from the inexorable transmission of practices of near-term-focused and regulation-undermining tactical decision-making from the empire to its areas of colonial contestation.

Most grievous, however, is the injury done by this Khartoum-spawned instability and fragmentation to the possibility that the radical diminishing of Darfur and Darfuris will come to an end and that the victims' will ever have a chance to reconstruct their lives in relatively secure circumstances and to receive compensation for their losses. De Waal's formulation of this process is that the GoS's internal instability and churning factional struggles produce a situation where "it is almost impossible to make peace" (23). At the same time, the delivery of any sort of justice based upon the trial of individuals will make no contribution to a solution. Structural factors, not identifiable individuals, drive events: "literally, nobody is in control" (23).

At times, however, this argument seems to conflate the constant sectarian struggles within the Khartoum area political class as a whole with factional disputes within the ruling NCP government descended from the Revolutionary Command Council, which was set up after the coup of 1989. As de Waal tells us, the GoS itself, whatever its internal rivalries, has been able to maintain long-term consistency and coherence in the policies producing domination of the periphery. It is thus unclear why figures such as al-Bashir, Nafi Ali Nafie, Sala Abdalla Gosh, and Ali Osman Taha, powerful managers of GoS policies since well before the current crisis in Darfur, could not arrange a settlement if their fundamental goals were thus secured.

If the failure of the long-running attempt at a negotiated peace at Abuja can be attributed to the internal instability of the GoS, can the structural weaknesses of the regime's opponents, the "movements" (as they are referred to in official accounts) be said to have rendered the collapse overdetermined? Accounts of the fragmentation of the rebel groups, shown by the activist experts of the Enough Project to be substantially exaggerated, continue to command first place in the situation reports of diplomats and international officials, despite current efforts of the government of South Sudan (GOSS) to unite the groups. This fragmentation can be said to be in large measure the result of the GoS's deliberate creation of chaos. It regularly attempts to transform negotiations into meetings where individual leaders bargain individually for personal goals (a process well described by de Waal) and it bombs coordination and unification meetings of leaders of different rebel groups whenever it can locate them. As the volume's contribution on Islamism by Ahmed Kamal el-Din indicates, however, ideological divisions may be just as important as such structural explanations. The article on the armed movements by Julie Flint makes clear, moreover, that conflicting tribal loyalties have played a role in rebel divisions, undermining at key points the cooperation between JEM and SLA and the cross-tribal composition of leadership groups.

Whatever the structural instabilities and internal conflicts burdening the two sides at Abuja, however, the essays in *War in Darfur and the Search for Peace* by Dawit Toga, Laurie Nathan, and de Waal himself show that their negotiating positions remained strikingly consistent. At certain brief moments both Mahzoub al Khalifa, the head of the GoS team, and Abdel Wahid al Nur, leader of the largest rebel group, appeared to compromise on a point or two, but such momentary lapses can be found in most extended negotiations. Demands on crucially important issues otherwise changed little from statements about key objectives made by both JEM and SLA in the early rounds:

1. The reunification of the Darfur region, split into three provinces by Khartoum in a transparent effort to render the population more easily dominated from the center.
2. Autonomy for the unified region, with the implication that Sudan would become a federal state.
3. Justice rendered to the perpetrators.
4. Compensation to victims. (Granting compensation, as opposed to reconstruction grants, would have implied that the GoS had a measure of responsibility for the destruction, something it did not want to admit openly, despite the tacit admission that it had control over the Janjaweed contained in its agreement to arrange for their appearance at disarmament areas and to cooperate in other ways.)
5. Security. This demand entailed the creation of a credible mechanism that would guarantee the enforcement of any agreed arrangements to control and limit the activities of armed groups on either side. As stated above, for example, in the final draft of the Darfur Peace Agreement, the government undertook to assemble the Janjaweed militias at designated control areas, where they would be disarmed, by the second week of July 2006. The document specified no measures to be taken, however, if this deadline were not met, which, to no one's surprise, it was not. The government made little effort to disguise its unqualified opposition to these demands.

Some other issues may have afforded space for negotiation and compromise. Power-sharing, in the form of the allocation to the movements of high offices in the Government of National Unity, a structure some considered a kind of administrative Potemkin village since no real decision-making power ever left the inner circles of the National Congress Party, was also one of the rebels' *desiderata*. A precedent for such an arrangement appeared in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, signed in January 2005 by the GoS and the Sudan Peoples Liberation Movement. It promised the south regional self-administration in the form of a government of South Sudan with a capital city at Juba and a referendum on separation from the rest of the country to be held in 2011. There were reasons why Khartoum made this particular concession, however, which did not apply to Darfur. In a generation of constant war with Khartoum, the south, with diplomatic and material support from Western countries, had developed a formidable guarantor of its own security, the Sudan People's Liberation Army, a disciplined, professional, reasonably well equipped army that had fought the north and its militia allies to a standstill. Nor did the CPA give a welcome to some of the Darfur rebels' other goals. The document contained no mention of the justice issue or the payment of individual compensation, a strong indication that no clauses addressing these demands would appear in the Darfur Peace Agreement.

The clearest indication that the GoS was foreign to the practice of negotiating in good faith was probably its long record of deceptive and devious diplomatic tactics ranging from bribery to document-rigging to carefully timed rejection of previously signed agreements, evidence for all of which can be found in the volume under review and in many other places. de Waal, moreover, limns the near-impossibility of making peace when he points to the GoS's governing structure at the roots of this devious diplomacy, stressing its instability, Darwinian factional behavior, and general volatility.

The most puzzling questions raised by *War in Darfur and the Search for Peace*, then, may be why the Abuja talks were held at all, why some people took them seriously, and why the editor of the volume spent so much time and effort as a mediator/advisor, trying to bring them to a successful conclusion. Perhaps the international mediators were willing to take up their Sisyphean task because they were convinced that the rebels' preferred solution, a robust intervention by NATO or some similar coalition, had no prospect of realization.

In any case, the result was that the peace talks at the Nigerian capital tended to dominate the agenda of would-be peacemakers and conflict resolution experts. Abuja became a sinkhole into which stumbled the hopes of those who accepted the premise that only a UN-backed comprehensive peace agreement between armed rebel groups and the Sudanese government could end the destruction of peoples and cultures. Alternative solutions based on different premises were pushed to the sidelines. The United Nations thus retained its position as the Great Alibi of the Great Powers, its egregiously understaffed and underfinanced deployments somehow providing the larger industrialized nations with an excuse not to take political or military risks themselves: blue helmets were already at the scene. The UN's subcontractor, the African Union, eager to establish its legitimacy and its distance from its discredited predecessor, the Organization of African Unity, let ambition overcome caution in the name of a repeatedly proclaimed political maturity: "African solutions for African problems."

*War in Darfur and the Search for Peace* shows how tragic was this narrowing of the field of action options. The structure of the negotiations pitted the young leaders of the rebel movements against the representatives of the GoS, led by the highly experienced Dr. Majzoub al-Khalifa. Most important among the many Darfuri groups

absent from the bargaining sessions were the Arab populations of Darfur themselves, neither the Janjaweed militias, recruited in substantial numbers from the landless Arab camel herders of the Abbala Rizeigat, nor the more numerous, cattle-herding Baggara Rizeigat from southern Darfur, most (but not all) of whom stayed neutral in the conflict between GoS and the rebels. Yet whatever other changes in the power relations and alleviation of grievances may be needed to accomplish it, any reversal of the radical diminishing of peoples and cultures that has occurred in Darfur depends on some kind of restoration of the pre-2002 relations among the region's Arab and non-Arab groups.

During four months in 2006 following the end of the Abuja negotiations in May, Abdul-Jabbar Fadul, a Darfuri professor at the University of El Fashir, and Victor Tanner, a researcher at Johns Hopkins University, conducted interviews with 120 inhabitants of the region "from many walks of life, including local inhabitants, displaced people, traditional leaders, and educated professionals" (284). In their chapter, "Darfur after Abuja: A View from the Ground," they note that among both Arabs and non-Arabs, attitudes had changed significantly since the two researchers conducted their first surveys in 2004. Fadul and Tanner encountered a judgement that the "manifest lack of goodwill on the part of the government" and the failure of two of the three rebel factions to sign the DPA left the region expecting a future marked by continued conflict and insecurity. Nor did the interviewees consider any longer that negotiations with the government could bring an end to the region's suffering. The DPA's failure and the weeks of violence following the disappointing signing ceremony had convinced them that there could be no peace "unless it was forced on the government militarily" (287).

This hardening of attitudes toward the government was not surprising. What is of equal or greater significance is the fact that all sides, Arab and non-Arab, had come to recognize the Sudanese state as principal perpetrator. Among the Fur and Masalit victims interviewed, bitterness against the Janjaweed militias ran deep, but the final responsibility for the damage was now laid at the door of Khartoum. A Fur *omda* told Fadul and Turner that "it was not a tribe fighting us, it was the National Islamic Front government." They had "fanned the flames, using the Arabs against the Africans." A displaced victim in south Darfur told them, "Even if the Arabs did take part, they are just poor people like us. The government is behind it." The investigators found that reconciliation had become a possibility. The non-Arab peoples of the region had suffered from the raids in which their Abbala Arab neighbors participated, but "they knew them, and they knew they would have to live with them in the future" (294).

On the side of the perpetrators, the results of Fadul and Tanner's 2006 survey pointed in the same direction. Arab leaders assessed the situation using language "far more conciliatory" than they had used in 2004. If they admitted that some of their tribesmen had participated in the attacks, the scale of which they no longer minimized, they pointed out at the same time that these men had done so as individuals, not as representatives of the tribe. The investigators' striking account of the remarks of an Arab *nazir* from the Kebkabiya area, the site of heavy destruction, compels the reader immediately to mark the page. This high-ranking traditional leader believed that the displaced had a right to return to their land and to demand compensation from the government for their losses. He was convinced that had there been "better coordination between the tribes," the rebellion could have united all Darfuris, Arabs and non-Arabs, in making the justified claims that the rebels made. In the case of the Tama, a non-Arab tribe who had allied with those Arabs carrying out attacks

on villages, an *omda* who had formerly taken a bellicose stance now showed his visitors a directive to his local leaders instructing them to forbid local Tama from cultivating the land of displaced farmers unless they could obtain the farmers' explicit permission.

Their research indicated to Fadul and Tanner the possible re-emergence of the "historic Darfur consensus," a "central majority bloc" that brings together the main ethnic groups of the region, both Arab and non-Arab, in a loyalty to the region that has been "the historic bedrock of Darfur society" and the foundation of its stability. They found that, in contrast to the highly contested "Sudanese consensus," a concept serving more as the focus of certain Sudanese intellectuals' hopes than as a operational social reality, the Darfur consensus was a functioning traditional political order that made Darfur viable, first as a Fur-dominated yet multi-ethnic sultanate, then as a region that, "while prone to local conflict over resources, remained quite stable until the late 1980s." For most of the Darfuris to whom the two talked, the conflict there clearly constituted an assault on this Darfur consensus.

Fadul and Tanner thus discovered a space of opportunity in the Darfuris' mental terrain, a chance for Darfur's inhabitants to come together themselves to end the destruction and displacement. The conceptual map of Sudan's history, as well as the organization of remedial action, could shift from its exclusive concentration upon the Nilo-centric north-south axis to the east-west axis. Alex de Waal's writing has been asking for this change for many years. The survival of the memory of the Darfur consensus prompted recognition that the Darfur region had a claim to integrity and cultural autonomy that was rooted in history and required consideration in the present's policy arguments.

The regime controlling the center of the Sudanese empire-state has long worked to break up that consensus, of course, by enlisting northern Rizeigat groups, and whatever other tribes it finds willing, in its campaigns of destruction directed at non-Arab groups. In a development adumbrated in *War in Darfur*, however, the men who joined the Janjaweed have become increasingly alienated from Khartoum. Julie Flint has written elsewhere about a "sea change" in the configuration of political alliances in Darfur.<sup>1</sup> Arabs, unpaid, betrayed in battle, and realizing they have been manipulated, have formed their own groups to combat GoS forces, and have even entered into alliances with non-Arab armed units.

To evaluate fully the chances that a moment for reconciliation and self-determination had arrived by the summer of 2006, however, would require answers to questions to which *War in Darfur* gives incomplete and analytically unsatisfactory answers. Chief among these is the importance, trajectory, and endurance of Arab supremacism as a theme motivating the perpetrators' attacks and expulsions. The volume's article by Ali Haggag locates one source of what Julie Flint calls this "openly racist" ideology in the Arab Legions promoted by Libya in the 1980s and 1990s. Haggag then describes the development of a semi-secret group who worked out the details of an overall strategy and action program to "change the demography of Darfur and empty it of African tribes":<sup>2</sup> the Arab Gathering. One of the functions of this latter group was to motivate and guide the Janjaweed, the militias recruited from six categories of armed Arab groups in Darfur and their tribal cousins among Chadian immigrants. According to Haggag, because the militias adhere to this ideology of Arab supremacy and are willing to commit murders and carry out wide-scale destruction in its name, they earn the support of the government in Khartoum. Many observers have concluded that government and militias are thus collaborating in genocide as defined by the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

The timing, intensity, and specific channels of communication whereby the NIF/NCP-dominated government carried out this support, however, remain unspecified. Nor is it clear that it was the Arab Gathering's eliminationist version of Arab supremacism that inspired the ethnically targeted initiatives from the GoS that shaped the events in Darfur. Further information needed to link together the racist ideology and the mechanics of enacting the genocidal project, or to distinguish between genocidal projects, which may have enlisted only a segment of the NCP elite, and "counterinsurgency on the cheap," which probably enlisted all of them, must be gathered from sources outside *War in Darfur and the Search for Peace*. For example, in *Darfur: A New History of a Long War*, de Waal and his co-author Julie Flint point out in their account of the Arab Gathering that the "crux of the ideology" of this group, which may "never have existed as a coherent organization," was a blend of Arab supremacy and Islamic extremism holding that only those who trace their lineage to the Prophet Mohammed are the true custodians of Islam and therefore entitled to rule Muslim lands. The "only true Arabs" are the Juhayna, the descendants of Mohammed's own Qoreishi clan who crossed to Darfur and Kordofan in the Middle Ages. In this view, Sudan's riverine elite were "half-caste" Nubian-Egyptians.<sup>3</sup> If this riverine elite, who compose a large majority of the current Sudanese NCP government, were angered by this attack on their legitimacy, it is not clear how they acted upon this anger. Abdalla Ali Masar, one of the first to articulate an extreme version of the Arab Gathering's ideology, later became an advisor to President al-Bashir for Darfur affairs.<sup>4</sup>

Other aspects of the GoS-Arab Gathering nexus remain unclear as well. A November 2007 International Crisis Group (ICG) report, while giving many confirming details about the "sea change" in alignments and alliances in Darfur, affirms that certain high-ranking generals of the regular Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) were sympathetic to the Arab Gathering ideology. At the same time, however, it points out that at the time of the SAF operations in Darfur in the fall of 2007 the Arab Gathering was considered to have ceased to exercise adequate control of fighting among Arabs themselves.<sup>5</sup>

*War in Darfur* also fails to examine fully the relationship between the "war in Darfur" and those Arabization policies of the GoS that do not involve violence, such as the favored treatment of Arab immigrants from Niger, Mali, Nigeria, Egypt, and other African countries (instant citizenship and voting rights, preference in employment, grants of land), imposition of the Arabic language, and discrimination in government positions against those who cannot prove Arab blood.

In short, the reports and analytic essays in the volume under review fail to give the African Union, the United Nations, other mediators, or unofficial readers a full understanding of the objectives of the parties to the conflict. Can one argue that whether or not the GoS's goal was to put down an insurgency with a minimal use of resources or to carry out some kind of radical diminishing of targeted, non-Arab peoples, through mass killings and expulsion—that is, a project to which many would apply the term genocide, or some *combination* of these two goals—should make no difference in the way one handles the attempt to mediate conflicts between the two sides? Is it not important to equip peacemakers with a detailed evaluation of the importance and negotiability the rebel movements attribute to various stated demands such as a unified region, the identity and credibility of the bodies charged with enforcing security arrangements, compensation for the victims, the delivery of justice to the perpetrators, or the attribution of high offices in a "National Unity" government in which office-holders not from the NCP would actually have power? The sad but



enlightening history of federal arrangements in the Sudan—vital information, it would seem, to anyone trying to reach a convincing settlement at Abuja—receives little attention in the volume, yet many analysts argue that it will be only the arrival of a true federalism, backed by regional institutions more resistant to subversion than those in the north–south Comprehensive Peace Agreement, that brings an end to the wars and atrocities in the Sudanese empire-state.

The limitations of *War in Darfur and the Search for Peace*, which nevertheless remains the most valuable single volume for anyone seeking to understand the Darfur genocide in its international and local political and social context, point the reader to a crucially important obstacle to the prevention and elimination of atrocity crimes: the continual and pervasive restriction of the resources allocated to the gathering and analysis of information pertinent to the planning and execution of the full range of possible actions which could stop the destruction and restore the culture of the victim populations.

The volume contains the papers sponsored by the Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum, established in 2000 as cooperative arrangement between the UN and the Social Science Research Council, where the volume's editor is a program director. The latter institution, an American coordinating and grant-making body, provides the UN with a systematic channel to outside experts in order to deepen the analysis upon which the UN bases its work on conflict. Justice Africa, a research and advocacy organization based in London and founded by Alex de Waal and others in 1999, also commissioned certain of the papers. The first set of papers were delivered to the African Union, presumably passed along by the UN, in "early 2005" in order to provide "background analysis of Darfur for the African Union mediation." It is not specified whether the volume includes all the papers submitted at that time.

The volume does, however, include a list of subjects that constitute "gaps" that could not be filled because of "constraints of space and time": sexual violence during the conflict, the government's conduct of the war to date, attempts at local conflict resolution, the impact of the war on livelihoods, the emergence of a war economy, and the humanitarian crisis and assistance efforts. "These must wait for another occasion" (xiv). One may presume, therefore, that on such critical subjects the AU did not receive, and probably did not request, any "background analysis" from the CPPF or Justice Africa. To the list of subjects given in de Waal's preface that would have been addressed but for the "constraints of space and time" one could add many more of equal or greater importance: a thorough survey of the political attitudes of the victim populations, including support for individual leaders (e.g., is the volatile Abdel Wahid still "our guy" to the majority of camp residents?); a comprehensive survey of recent developments in the technology of aerial surveillance, interdiction, and neutralization; and a complete investigation of the international sources of combatants' logistical support and an analysis of such supporting governments' vulnerability to various kinds of pressure.

In dealing with atrocity crimes, moreover, one must think big and plan big. It is just possible, for example, that Fadul and Tanner's remarkable survey of changes in Darfuri attitudes after July 2006, which discovered the Darfuris' conviction that "peace depended on one of two things—a non-consensual deployment of Western troops or a rebel military victory, or both" (287)—would have prompted urgent and effective action if it had been stated with the authority of a thousand systematically randomized interviews, rather than 120 rather aleatory ones. In short, neither genocide nor counterinsurgency on the cheap can be countered by research and analysis on the cheap.

## Notes

1. See Julie Flint,, “A Seismic Political Shift is Taking Place in Darfur,” *Daily Star* (Beirut), 31 December 2007.
2. Quoted in Alex de Waal and Julie Flint, *Darfur: A New History of a Long War* (London: Zed Books, 2008), 37.
3. Ibid., 51.
4. Ibid., 50.
5. International Crisis Group, *Darfur’s New Security Reality*, Africa Report No. 134 (Nairobi: International Crisis Group, 2007), 4.